

9-1-1985

Language, the Uncanny, and the Shapes of History in Claude Simon's *The Flanders Road*

Lynn A. Higgins
Dartmouth College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/sttcl>



Part of the [French and Francophone Literature Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

Recommended Citation

Higgins, Lynn A. (1985) "Language, the Uncanny, and the Shapes of History in Claude Simon's *The Flanders Road*," *Studies in 20th Century Literature*: Vol. 10: Iss. 1, Article 9. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.1177>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in 20th Century Literature* by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

Language, the Uncanny, and the Shapes of History in Claude Simon's *The Flanders Road*

Abstract

Asking whether it is possible to read *The Flanders Road* both as text and as history the essay studies repetitions that structure the novel as they relate to historical events evoked therein, from the Revolution to the Algerian War. The tangled and looped itinerary of a cavalry retreat finds its analog in the narrative "line"; generic variations emerge when (hi)stories are told again and again; these, and even certain kinds of wordplay make the novel, and ultimately history, seem uncanny. But it is the novel's self-conscious strangeness, as it enfolds historical knowledge, that constitutes a commentary on how history is told and even how it is experienced.

Keywords

The Flanders Road, repetition, structure, Revolution, Algerian War, line, history, experience

LANGUAGE, THE UNCANNY, AND THE SHAPES OF HISTORY IN CLAUDE SIMON'S *THE FLANDERS ROAD*

LYNN A. HIGGINS
Dartmouth College

One must imagine Sisyphus
happy.

Albert Camus

*The Flanders Road*¹ is a tale told by a survivor. Its narrator, Georges, participated in the defeat and rout of the French army in May, 1940, in Flanders, and he attempts to reconstruct that traumatic experience some six years later. Like the protagonists of so many modern fictions about history from *Hiroshima mon amour* to *Slaughterhouse Five*, Georges is fixated on an "image of ultimate horror,"² a scene that he witnessed: his commanding officer, Captain de Reixach (also a distant cousin) was shot down by machine-gun fire during the disorderly retreat. The reality of the event, however, along with its possible meanings, is inaccessible to Georges, and while he brings it into the present by telling it again and again, it becomes progressively more enigmatic, complex and ramified, blending with other events and with thoughts and sensations from the present. Georges finds his rambling memory triggered by a sexual encounter, so that a remembered military and national debacle is inscribed in the present story of a romantic failure.

Among other difficulties, Georges suffers from his own contradictory existence as a character. The reader must constantly ask who is speaking as the story passes from "he" to "I" and back, between interiority and exteriority. Maurice Merleau-Ponty credits Simon with inventing an "intermediate person" that narrates from nowhere and everywhere at once.³ Text and character converge, so

that a multiple surface gains ascendancy over any individual speaking voice. Georges, in whose mind (in whose narration) everything takes place, is himself no more than a place where images and memories intersect. In addition to calling Georges a character, therefore, it will be helpful to think of him as dramatizing at least two more functions. "Georges" can be considered the name of the tenuous and unreliable narration itself, as it struggles and fails to weave a coherent discourse from discontinuous strands of memory.⁴ Secondly, Georges is a reader—of his own experiences and their interconnections with historical events and processes and of books, as his friend Blum repeatedly points out. The extent to which the past can be understood in the present is constantly diminished by the capacity of words to produce their own events. As readers of Georges's readings, we are subject to the same contradictory pull between (hi)story that can be reconstructed and attention that must be paid to the distancing and creatively proliferating work of memory and text. Thus we are in a position relative to the novel that Georges occupies with respect to the past, and his desire to interpret that past is analogous to the critical attempt to interpret the novel. Thirteen years before *The Flanders Road* appeared in 1960, Simon was already exploring his realization that what we call memory is as much a process of invention as of recall; asking himself why he is concerned with memory at all, in that case, he replies that he writes "in order to remember what happened during the process of writing."⁵ If the process of writing (and reading, interpreting) produces its own memories, history becomes very problematic indeed.

Critical attention to Simon's work—and to the New Novel generally—has long focused almost exclusively, and usually quite appropriately, on textual strategies that subvert assumptions about literature's capacity to represent. But the presence of a historical signified, widely overlooked or considered unproblematic, makes *The Flanders Road* an exemplary case for investigation into the role of historical content in anti-referential writing and, conversely, the role of language in historical discourse.⁶ Is it even possible to read the novel both as text and as (hi)story? Georges (or the narration) finds himself unable to become a discourse on history, but only a tentative discourse on the discourses of history; rather than formulating anything coherent, the narration (or Georges) repeats, turns back, and is unable (or refuses, for reasons we will investigate) to conclude.

The novel sets up its own myth of the relationship between

language and history. Victory authorizes all sorts of representations, Georges explains, giving an example from Revolutionary times. An allegorical painting, resembling Delacroix's "Liberty Leading the People," represents a woman in white robes and phrygian bonnet holding a sword and conferring on successive generations "the right to make speeches" (p. 218) in picture, song and tale. A discourse of defeat is more difficult to formulate, especially years after the events, when memories are relived. Governments and their established discourses tend to suppress stories of defeat, humiliation and disillusionment, or transform them into comforting or justifying mythologies. Even when defeat is described, it is portrayed as a momentary dip in a plot line that will turn out better later on, and upon which it is possible to reflect in habitual ways.

By contrast, *The Flanders Road* sees the debacle of 1940 as responsible not only for the fall of France but also for the defeat of language and the desintegration of representation:

in full retreat or rather rout or rather disaster in the middle of this collapse of everything as if not an army but the world itself the whole world and not only in its physical reality but even *in the representation the mind can make of it*. . . . (p. 15, emphasis added)

Collapsing along with belief in the objectivity of history and the possibility of heroism, then, are the traditional means to formulate the loss. Furthermore, history itself is seen as the cause of the collapse of representation. Exploration in and of a language that is by definition fragmentary is a highly unreliable (but the only authentic) way of knowing the past. The novel's working title was "Fragmentary description of a disaster." In the final title (*La Route des Flandres* in French), the word *route*, derived from the Latin *via rupta* or "broken way," points both to the debacle itself and to the fractured narrative path to its reconstruction. As Georges's memories turn and return in the flow of his words, historical events and epochs are brought into the tangle of his stories, so that transformations the novel effects on the shape of narration will have implications for what can be imagined as the plots of history. Simon's meandering historical novel even points the way toward new ways of dealing with history as it happens. This is possible because of Simon's implicit conviction (shared with other novelists and critics) that there exists a reciprocal determination

between the stories a civilization tells itself and the history it produces.

Georges's consideration of the past is concentrated on his search to know whether or not de Reixach walked his horse deliberately into an enemy ambush. If so, he suspects that this virtual suicide might have been motivated by his wife's infidelities. Initially, Georges's only evidence for this hypothesis is the remembered scene itself. Especially insistent is the image of de Reixach's final and fatal gesture before falling from his horse: his sole response to machine guns was to charge anachronistically with an ancestral and aristocratic sword. In his desire to know the truth about de Reixach, Georges seeks out his widow, Corinne, and seduces her. Her presence both unlocks and complicates his memories. The narration unfolds, mostly as interior monologue, while Georges lies half-awake in bed beside Corinne, unraveling bits of memories, fantasies, evidence and sensations from the past and present. Each time his memory returns to the scene, more detail emerges, and more layers of personal and public history adhere to his story. Eventually, the novel encompasses almost a century and a half, ending in late summer of 1946 (the present tense of Georges's narration) and stretching back to the last decade of the eighteenth century, when a shared de Reixach ancestor voted the death penalty for Louis XVI.

Georges remembers endless time and space covered on horseback—fleeing in panic during the cavalry retreat, wandering lost in the Flanders forest, or simply riding from town to town in search of food and shelter. Shortly, we will discuss one particular horse in detail. First let us look at the paths traveled by horses and their riders, paths that imitate the meandering of the narration itself. An image of the text-as-traveler and its relevance to Georges is most apparent in Simon's preface to his *Orion Aveugle*. Taking as his point of departure the name of the collection in which the book appeared—"Les Sentiers de la création"—Simon declares that he knows no other "paths of creation" than "those opened step by step, that is to say word after word, by the forward motion [*cheminement*] of writing."⁷ The novel thus becomes an imaginary landscape explored by a process of narration, by a narrator, and by a reader. That *cheminement* is not a linear quest, however; its only goal is "the exhaustion of the traveler exploring this inexhaustible landscape" (*OA*, Preface, n. pag.). Along the way, the voyager comes upon semantically and phonetically polyvalent words that Simon calls

"crossroads where routes intersect." These words send narration off on multiple overlapping excursions and unexpected digressions. The traveler faces choices, the path bifurcates and returns, all of which makes for an involuted and looping itinerary.

Simon's description of blind Orion's narrative path, constantly proliferating at the crossroads-words, is similar to the itinerary of the protagonist in *The Flanders Road*: that path, we read,

is very different from the one usually followed by the novelist . . . who, setting out from a "beginning" arrives at an "end." Mine turns and returns on itself, as might a traveler lost in a forest, retracing his steps, going off again, misled (or guided?) by the resemblance of certain spots that are nonetheless different and that he seems to recognize . . . his path frequently intersecting with itself, passing again through the same places already traversed . . . and it can even happen that at the "end" one finds oneself back at the point of departure. (*OA*, Preface, n. pag.)

It is easy to forget that this passage describes not Georges but Orion, and is part not of a fiction but of a preface on Simon's theory of narrative. Elsewhere, Simon makes the link explicit between the image of narration as wanderer and the lost soldiers in *The Flanders Road*. That novel, he says, follows "the horsemen in their wandering (or the narrator wandering in a forest of images)." ⁸

Another tangled configuration, like the one evoked above, is specific to *The Flanders Road*. Three loops in the form of a cloverleaf describe the path that brings Georges and his cavalry companions back to a spot in the road where they find a dead horse in progressive stages of decomposition. This horse remains imprinted in Georges's memory. It becomes an obsession, and colors his descriptions of other things. Since Georges's own spiritual itinerary and the novel's tripartite organization follow the same outline, the cloverleaf motif and the principle of repetition it represents must be considered a major structuring pattern.

Almost nothing in *The Flanders Road* happens only once. The debacle of 1940 repeats the fall of Napoleon's army, and de Reixach's possible suicide is a refiguration of the Ancestor's. ⁹ Corinne is the ideal fantasized woman, but so is a peasant woman glimpsed momentarily in the light of a lantern. That peasant woman figures in a tale of jealous animosity that mirrors the novel's other amorous

triangles. If Corinne might have been unfaithful to de Reixach by having an affair with his jockey, Iglesia, Georges plays Iglesia's role in Corinne's second marriage. And while Georges repudiates his father, Pierre, he finds a substitute father figure in de Reixach, a configuration that casts an incestuous light on his liaison with Corinne and recalls the incest theme in the peasant's story. Part of the novel's difficulty is this endless dance of substitutions in a proliferation of often very sinister doubling effects.

The most insistent of all such duplications is Georges himself, who is both past and present, character and story, "I" and "he." The first time we become aware of his double pronominal existence occurs just after the first description of the dead horse. Until then, the only narrator was an "I." Otto Rank helps explain this switch when he maintains that duplication can be a way of denying death and loss. Commenting on Rank's study of doubles, Harry Tucker observes that the theme of the double seems itself to return to popularity in the context of major upheavals such as wars. Although Tucker concludes that no causal relationship has been established, he finds, quite sensibly, that "wars and other extensive disturbances of society are among those occasions which cause man to ask himself fundamental questions about his identity—an identity which he finds existing on various levels or even in fragmentation."¹⁰ *The Flanders Road* lends credence to these speculations. Although death is everywhere, finality is nowhere. De Reixach dies at least three times, and other scenes and characters and paragraphs multiply at least as frantically following the tangled plot line described above. Simon claims that Corinne and the dead horse are two fixed points to which the narration (and Georges) must consistently return (*Nouveau Roman*, p. 89). I think these points must be seen, initially, as more abstract narrative principles. Georges's desire for Corinne is his desire to tell (her) his story; she is his motivating intention that makes the narration travel from its first word to its last. Georges's fantasy of Corinne propels him forward just as surely as his need to know the past pushes him backward in time. The riderless dead horse is an image of disintegration and the end (if not closure) to which life and narration must ultimately arrive. Doubling back of plot, and pairing of scenes, characters, images and words form the loops that fill the space between desire and its extinction.

There is, of course, repetition in every fictional text, and the project of a nonlinear plot is not a new idea. Rarely are these concerns

elevated to the obsessive and theoretical status that they attain in certain New Novels, and rarely are repetition and bifurcation used as productively as in *The Flanders Road* to determine the shape of the narrative. Peter Brooks proposes that our understanding of beginnings, middles and ends in fiction can be refined by considering Freud's formulation of the repetition compulsion as a dynamic model of plot. Freud's model, writes Brooks (who could just as well be describing *The Flanders Road*),

effectively structures ends (death, quiescence, non-narratability) against beginnings (Eros, stimulation into tension, the desire of narrative) in a manner that necessitates the middle as *détour*, as struggle toward the end under the compulsion of imposed delay, as arabesque in the dilatory space of the text.¹¹

The Flanders Road takes its givens literally: desire takes the form of sexual desire, and the end is death, a return to an earlier state, which Freud finds beyond repetition. Pleasure takes the form of Georges's return to the womb via Corinne, but his pleasure mimics the dead horse's return to the earth, its forelegs folded in a fetal position. What is inhabital about the plot of *The Flanders Road*, and what makes Freud, Brooks and Rank particularly applicable, is that the end of the novel is not an end at all; on the other hand, death is to be found everywhere in the middle.

Déjà vu

The importance and centrality of the dead horse are indisputable. What is less clear are its links to other themes, both fictional and historical. While its reappearance provides a motif of repetition and structure, for Georges it becomes an object of simultaneous obsessive fascination and horror. Here is the first reappearance of the horse:

they (Iglesia and he) stayed where they were, stupefied, sitting on their skeletal mounts in the middle of the road, while he thought with a kind of stupor, a despair, a calm disgust (like the convict letting go the rope that has allowed him to climb up the last wall, crouching, standing up, preparing himself to jump, and then discovering that he had just fallen at the very feet of his guard who is waiting for him): "But I've already seen this somewhere. I know this. But when? And where was it? . . ." (p. 102)

Thus ends the first part of the novel. The parenthetical comparison to a prisoner recaptured conveys the asphyxiating panic of the experience while suggesting already its deadly reduplication. Georges will see this scene again at least twice.

Now compare the above scene to this one:

Once, as I was walking through the deserted streets of a provincial town in Italy which was strange to me, on a hot summer afternoon, I found myself in a quarter the character of which could not long remain in doubt. Nothing but painted women were to be seen at the windows of the small houses, and I hastened to leave the narrow street at the next turning. But after having wandered about for a while without being directed, I suddenly found myself back in the same street, where my presence was now beginning to excite attention. I hurried away once more, but only to arrive yet a third time by devious paths in the same place.

This narrator follows the same looped itinerary as Simon's soldiers. There is nothing inherently frightening about this experience, any more than the sight of a dead horse on a battlefield seems to warrant Georges's exaggerated horror. But this narrator, too, describes his feeling of panic at his continued involuntary return to the very spot he was trying to escape. Repetition seems determined by a fate these narrators cannot control. The panic derives not from the situation itself, but from a "sense of helplessness sometimes experienced in dreams."

The narrator in the second situation above is Sigmund Freud, and the anecdote supplies an example of "The Uncanny," that dreamlike realm of the simultaneously strange and familiar.¹² Freud's example imitates the trefoil configuration of the soldiers' wanderings and the structure of *The Flanders Road*. Georges notices the repetitions in his behavior and in his story, feels them as compulsive or involuntary, and finds them sinister. Perhaps it is his awareness of the uncanny nature of events that makes him find history overwhelming and respond to it passively. Or, as Freud puts it, "it is only this factor of involuntary repetition which surrounds with an uncanny atmosphere what would otherwise be innocent enough, and forces upon us the idea of something fateful and inescapable where otherwise we should have spoken of 'chance' only" ("The Uncanny,"

p. 390). What seems to be a chance encounter is the work of the unconscious, bringing back what was repressed or forgotten, and so Simon's cloverleaf or tangled loops mark the itinerary of the wanderer brought back to the scene of personal and historical trauma. These returns are thus anything but random or arbitrary, and what seems strange is strange only because it is strangely familiar.

Freud defines the uncanny as "that class of the terrifying that leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar" ("The Uncanny," p. 369), and then more pointedly asserts that "the uncanny proceeds from something familiar which has been repressed" ("The Uncanny," p. 401). Before discovering why Georges is compelled to reencounter a scene that so horrifies and disgusts him, it will be necessary to determine just what it is that he is repeating. There are horses everywhere in *The Flanders Road*, so that the attention this single dead horse commands seems disproportionate, given the surrounding massacre. It would not be surprising to find that horses are the focus of a displaced concern, or that this one dead horse tells the story of Georges's contradictory impulses to remember and to forget, of his desire for history and his repression of it.

What obsesses Georges is the cadaver's state of decomposition, which seems to progress at an unnatural rate ("a kind of transmutation or accelerated transubstantiation," p. 104). The earth reabsorbs her own issue by digestion, or more insistently by a curious sort of reverse birth, with the horse returning to a preanimate form folded in a fetal position. Here, the uncanny rejoins the repetition compulsion of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. The horse's return to the earth takes it through stages in which it is neither horse nor earth, neither animate nor inanimate, another situation likely to evoke terror according to Freud. Georges describes the cadaver vividly, as "something unexpected, unreal, hybrid" and as "what had been a horse" (p. 25). *The Flanders Road* teems with hybrids and monsters. Characters are half-human, half-animal: Iglesia has a face like a lobster claw; a portrait shows a great-grandmother with a carnival mask that makes her look like a "monstrous bird"; an enemy soldier with murderous intent disguises himself as a maid and introduces himself into an old lady's household. By far the majority of the half-human composites refer to horses: Corinne is a chestnut filly; incorporating an image from an old letter describing a centaur, the description calls the Ancestor a "genitor," then a "stallion," and later simply a

“horse/man.” The sexual act is described as a violent coupling of incompatible classes or species, for which the term *chevauchement* (horseback riding, but also overlapping and blurring of distinctions) conveys the monstrosity. These are examples of the collapse and overlap of categories that demonstrate the defeat of everything, including language.

All these *chevauchements*¹³ bring the reader constantly back to the ride through the Flanders woods in May of 1940 and to what is the most insistent horse/man of all: the “equestrian statue” composed of de Reixach and his horse, walking toward sudden death before the narrator’s eyes. So united are the two components, that it is as if “he and his horse had been cast together out of one and the same material, a gray metal” (p. 11). This and other passages suggest that Georges’s obsession with the dead horse must be seen as a return to de Reixach’s death in another form, as if the horse itself, like some mutilated synecdoche, stood for the whole “equestrian statue.” Focus slides from horse to man without warning; brooding over the horse’s “accelerated transubstantiation,” for example, Georges suddenly asks “how can you say how long a man is dead . . .” (p. 104). At points like this, he breaks off abruptly, or moves on to another subject, like Corinne.

The return of the obsessive image is related to Georges’s failure to return *to* the scene:

saying: “See what?”, and I: “If he’s dead. After all even like that at point-blank range the sniper might have missed him, might only have wounded him or only killed his horse since the horse fell when we saw him take out his saber and . . .” then I stopped talking. . . . (p. 47)

Betraying the dictates of his conscious will, he suppresses the story, but subsequently returns involuntarily to the spot where only the horse remains. The erased scene, however, the one he did not go back to see, becomes the subject both of his incessant uncanny return and of his floating question, “but how can you tell, how can you tell?” Not having seen, he imagines. Having survived, he is obsessed with the idea of his own death.

If Corinne is a mother principle in Georges’s imagination, de Reixach plays in several ways the role of a father. The novel’s first scene shows him receiving a letter from Georges’s mother, Sabine,

informing him—as fathers always have to be informed—that he is related to her son.¹⁴ Georges rejects his own parents only to put others in their place, through a series of substitutions: Corinne replaces Sabine (aided, perhaps, by the similarity of the names) and Georges replaces de Reixach in Corinne's bed. It is no wonder that he is haunted by the possibility that de Reixach might not be dead. Fallen at the crossroads, de Reixach is at the center of the novel's Oedipal configurations. The *x* at the center of his name reappears in all the narration's crossing paths. A displaced incest theme turns up in a story of peasant jealousies, and any hybrid monster might be a sphinx.

But de Reixach is also the son. His mysterious disappearance from the scene of his own death brings into focus another figure killed at/on a cross(roads). In this version, de Reixach's death turns on a pun: it is a double "Passion, with this difference that the site the center the altar wasn't a naked hill but that smooth and tender and hairy and secret crease in the flesh . . . Yes: crucified. . . ." And if, as the stimulus to involuntary memory, Corinne is Georges's *petite madeleine*, she is de Reixach's Magdalene, as the above passage continues: "But after all wasn't there a whore at the other crucifixion too, presuming that whores are indispensable in such things, women in tears wringing their hands and penitent whores, supposing that he had ever asked her to repent . . ." (p. 12).

Although there is more evidence in the text that points to both these mythical subtexts, what interests us here in the stories of the martyred father and son is the narration of the guilty survivor. Georges's failure to go back and look, his obsessive memory, and the confessional form of his narrative suggest that he seeks not memory at all—or at least not memory alone—but rather, something resembling redemption. For while he seeks to remember, he also wants to forget; and although he asks "How can you tell?" his rediscovery of the past is uncanny and threatening. Thus can we understand his quest for Corinne, whom he describes as a communion wafer and as the "milk of forgetfulness." Simon uses Oedipal and Christian motifs self-consciously, I think. The death of de Reixach, like the execution of the king (for which the Ancestor was partly responsible) has the mythical status of an archetypal Curse or an Original Sin. It is the Fall. And that Fall inscribes the fall of France in 1940.

Fall, betrayal, failed responsibility, collapse of everything, suicide: these are the themes of Simon's novel, and they are also the

terms in which the debacle of May-June 1940 is described by historians. Although Simon's novel is in no sense a "document" or an "account" of the events, aspects of the military and spiritual defeat appear in countless fictional analogs. Examples range from major failures (anachronistic weaponry and strategy) to curious detail (rumors of German military spies disguised as nuns appear in the form of an allusion to a disguised and deadly "maid").¹⁵

Historian Marc Bloch, for example, like Claude Simon, served in the army in Belgium and Flanders in 1940, and both were participants in the defeat and subsequent retreat. Bloch's thorough and thoughtful discussion of the disaster reveals many of its facets that find echoes in *The Flanders Road*: abdication of responsibility on the part of intellectuals is embodied in Georges's father Pierre; outmoded communications in the field are responsible for the fact that Georges learns from a frantic peasant that the battle has been lost; a sense of betrayal is revealed in Georges's emphasis (and invention) of Corinne's infidelities and de Reixach's disillusionment; rigid conceptions of space and time that prevented effective response to panzer advances might have produced a cloverleaf retreat path that combines frenetic movement with failure to advance or retreat; and so on.¹⁶

One of Bloch's major points is the fatal failure on the part of French military and political leadership to realize that a war in 1940 could not be fought with the same technical or conceptual equipment used in 1914-18. He points out that most of the military leaders earned their ranks in the earlier war and were brought out of retirement in 1939. To Bloch's description corresponds de Reixach's advanced age, and the ludicrous anachronism of his response to attack: his horse is helpless faced with columns of advancing tanks, and his sword is less than useless to fend off automatic weapons. His death is the death of a social and historical anachronism, as poignant and as emblematic as that of de Boeldieu in Renoir's *La Grande Illusion*. De Reixach, like de Boeldieu, represents a class, even a nation, looking backwards. The failure, Bloch makes clear, was not only military, and the suicide was collective.

Indeed, the most telling dimension of Bloch's account, and one of its most striking parallels with *The Flanders Road*, is its presentation within the conventions of a confessional genre. "The generation to which I belong has a bad conscience" (p. 171), he declares, and he calls the defeat a "stain" and a "sin." France was guilty at all levels of blindly repeating behavior of earlier eras, even when such behavior

was suicidal. While the Germans were aware of the need to fight a new war, France helplessly reiterated the mentality of previous defeats. In this light the title of Bloch's indictment—*Strange Defeat*—is itself strange. So convincing is the historian's explanation of France's weaknesses that the defeat takes on the inevitability of his logic. What is strange about this defeat is not the fact of the defeat itself, but the fact that it was not strange enough. We might say in other words that Bloch's title suggests the presence of compulsive and involuntary repetition in history.

The anachronism of de Reixach's gesture has both a historical and a dreamlike dimension, then, and its repetition at intervals throughout the novel creates for the reader the same sense of *déjà vu* that Bloch, a First World War veteran, describes. Georges's image of horror—his memory of de Reixach with his sword—is an appropriate one in terms of Bloch's analysis, as it expresses the futility and absurdity of the French predicament in 1940. The same national "suicide" must have been on Albert Camus's mind, too, in 1940, when he wrote *The Myth of Sisyphus*, and where he describes humanity as condemned to the repetition of futile gestures. The image he chooses to illustrate the idea of the absurd gesture ties his historical vision to Bloch's and Simon's: "If I see a man armed only with a sword attack a group of machine guns, I shall consider his act to be absurd."¹⁷

The Flanders Road introduces another sense of *déjà vu* with the story of the Ancestor, and there emerge some unexpected implications of repetition in history when we compare his story with de Reixach's, the Flanders defeat with Napoleon's "suicidal" war in Spain. Piecing together details about the Ancestor, we can read the story of a liberal noble who gave up his privileges (and the particle preceding his name) on August 4, 1789. Inspired with enthusiasm for Rousseau, this (de) Reixach's career follows the vicissitudes of the Revolution: he votes for the king's execution at the Convention, rises to the rank of general and leads Napoleon's Imperial Army into Spain. That invasion, more poignantly than most of Napoleon's other campaigns, showed to what extent the Revolution had changed color. Generally called the Spanish War of Independence, that war ended only when the French army was defeated and driven out of Spain in 1813. By then it was clear that an imperialist conquest could no longer be disguised as a liberating mission. If the de Reixach Ancestor waited until 1813 to lose his Revolutionary illusions, he must have

been one of the last. (Beethoven renamed his third symphony before 1805.) In any case, he returns to his family home defeated and disillusioned and shoots himself.¹⁸

As the details unfold, the Ancestor and the descendant's stories seem to repeat each other. Both de Reixachs are commissioned to lead what turned out to be utterly futile missions. Both die, apparently by suicide, after having suffered what Georges sees as a loss of illusions. In each story there is a marital betrayal that mirrors (or stands for) a betrayal by ideals and by superiors; and each suicide prefigures the suicide of a government. Georges even imagines that Captain de Reixach's death is a reenactment of the General's, "as if war, violence, murder had somehow resuscitated him in order to kill him a second time as if the pistol bullet fired a century and a half before had taken all these years to reach its second target to put the final period to a new disaster . . ." (p. 80).

This is Georges's story, however, and it simply does not work. The two deaths might resemble each other, but if we look at their contexts as described by historians more reliable than Georges, we can see that the two disasters are virtually mirror opposites. Although both de Reixachs might have been disillusioned, those disillusionments are different. And if it appears at first that the Ancestor did kill himself, this becomes unclear as the novel progresses, and may even be the result of Georges's inventions that bring the two stories into parallel alignment. The suicide may even stem from Georges's childhood referential illusion, as he contemplated the Ancestor in a portrait whose surface had developed a smudged ruddy hole in the forehead. Or perhaps the Ancestor was shot by his young wife's lover at the end of a midnight ride that brought him home earlier than expected. Most importantly, while de Reixach dies defending his country from aggression, the Ancestor dies as a result of perpetrating a similar invasion on behalf of a French Empire.

Georges overlooks differences between his two stories because they are disguised in progressively thicker layers of repetition as he tells and retells them: disillusionment, betrayal and suicide mask fundamental ironies contrasting the two historical circumstances. The Flanders defeat of 1940 was, in the ways I have indicated, not a repetition but a reversal of Napoleon's 1813 retreat from Spain. In other ways, 1940 was also a mirror image of the overall outcome of the "Great War," a change of fortune that was to be attributed, by Bloch and others, to France's repetition of outmoded gestures: 1940

and 1918; 1940 and 1813. Repetition in history is ultimately revealed or disguised by means of narrative devices, whether the text is a "novel" or a "history." The pairs of events evoked in *The Flanders Road* reveal an underlying rhetoric of reversal disguised as repetition (1813/1940), and repetition within reversal (1940/1914-18). That Simon sees history, and especially revolution, as ironic series of repetitions and reversals of direction is demonstrated by many of his novels and especially by *Le Palace* (1962), whose epigraph from the Larousse dictionary brings us back to graphic images of plot: "Revolution: a body's motion around a closed curve, retracing the same points in succession."¹⁹ While Georges may not be aware of it, the history he tells is "emplotted" (to borrow Hayden White's term) in an ironic mode.²⁰

One of the consequences of irony is that it brings the speaker into the story, and along with him, the present frame of his narration. Georges is repeatedly brought back to the present. His question, "What time is it?" threads through the novel as an indication of the present, which is the only time watches tell. And the visibility of the narrative frame encourages us to look in turn at the temporal frame of the novel's production. Simon has said that he had intended to write *The Flanders Road* for twenty years.²¹ He finally began the project during a period that was itself characterized by repetition and reversal of past national crises. As a trefoil has three leaves, the stories of the two de Reixachs invite comparison with the historical situation of 1958-60. Reversals that come to light when those two stories are compared in their contexts mirror some of the ironies of postwar French history.

For writers and journalists of the Left—among them various former members of the Resistance like Camus, Simon and Sartre—the French war in Algeria produced not only disillusionment and a sense of futile effort and failed collective responsibility, but also a peculiar sense of *déjà vu*. For Sartre, that war was an uncanny trip through the looking glass. Commenting on the referendum and constitution that defined de Gaulle's return to power in 1958, he writes that since the death of Louis XIV, "every good Frenchman is an orphan." Now, however, the electorate has gotten what it wanted: "King Charles XI." And writing to condemn the use of torture in Algeria, Sartre observes that it is no longer possible to look in the mirror of 1940-44 and see the French as victims, because "victim and executioner no longer form but a single image: our image."²² The

Fourth Republic's inability to resolve the Algerian question seemed an ominous forecast; that the emblem (if not the hero) of the Resistance should take the reins of a government committed to continued presence in Algeria invited historical comparison. Seeking parallels for events of 1958, historian Gordon Wright has recourse to reversal and irony, as he describes the situation in terms significant for *The Flanders Road*:

De Gaulle was authorized to draft a new constitution for approval by popular referendum. If this was a revolution, it was an unusual sort—bloodless, like that of 1870. But if there is any historical parallel for the events of 1958, it may be found not in 1870 but in 1940. There was some irony in the fact that de Gaulle arrived in power in much the same fashion as Pétain—by the abject surrender of the members of parliament, a kind of suicide of the regime.²³

I do not wish to argue that *The Flanders Road* is “about” Algeria or de Gaulle. Rather, I think these structural and thematic echoes indicate that the novel demands to be read in its own time frame. The fact that Georges tells his story within the frame of another failure is significant here. His story emanates from his encounter with Corinne; that relationship ends in disaster because Georges is repeating attitudes towards her that may have seemed natural in a prisoner-of-war camp, but which are at the very least inappropriate in his dealing with a real (i.e. not a fantasized) Corinne, who resents being treated as a “soldier’s joke” (“une fille à soldats,” p. 281). Like de Reixach and the Ancestor, Georges is so fixated on the past that he misses the present. We do not need to repeat his mistake. By emphasizing its own anachronisms and dislocated temporality, and by constantly recalling that Georges’s memories are a function of the situation of their enunciation, the narration urges us to place the novel itself in its own history.

It is also significant that Georges’s present predicament is a romantic one. Just as evidence (or invention) of tales of sexual betrayal masks the differences between de Reixach and the Ancestor and makes their (hi)stories seem parallel, Georges’s present interpersonal debacle is part of his generalized retreat from involvement in society. He tries, but fails, to understand history as a love story. He gives up his studies and takes up farming, preferring its

more reliable cycles to the uncanny and irregular loops of public events.

Déjà lu

"We historians are always reinterpreting the past," Joe went on. "But if history is a trauma, maybe the thing to do is redream it."

John Barth (*Letters*)

In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, itself a treatise on certain uncanny elements in French history, Marx makes his famous statement about repetition in history:

Hegel remarks somewhere that all facts and personages of great importance in world history occur, as it were, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce.²⁴

In *The Flanders Road*, there is no "first time" outside of legend, rumor, and family oral history passed down through Sabine's self-serving *bavardages*. There is only the chronological order of the narration, which develops its own characteristic pattern of theme and variation. Therefore, for the purposes of reading history in Simon, we have to amend Marx's statement by saying that he forgot to add: the first time *told* as tragedy, the second as farce. Like the looping narrative/cavalry paths, generic variation within the novel takes us repeatedly through what seems to be the "same" story.

As I have suggested, there is nothing strange about the historical episodes in the novel once the frame is enlarged to include the teller. Uncanny repetitions that could have been attributed to fate turn out to reveal the intentions of a storyteller. Each version contests the previous ones, emphasizing the gaps and absences in history. However, historiography—that is, the making of history in language—is visible at every level. Freud remarks that an uncanny effect is often produced by "effacing the distinction between imagination and reality" ("The Uncanny," p. 398). If this is the case, then repetition-with-difference turns the referential illusion into a kind of neurosis, and the uncanny into a reading effect.

The novel shows a great deal of concern with the genres in which events are cast. As episodes are retold, each version reveals more strings and mirrors and other stage tricks. Furthermore, the implications of each story for the others become apparent. For example, we can see how the death of de Reixach is rewoven to incorporate bits of the Ancestor's story and vice versa. By following the fate of one story—the Ancestor's—we can trace the progressive rings of scepticism that bring the act of telling into perspective and indicate by what mechanisms the novel arrives at an ironic (if inconclusive) reading of history.

The Ancestor's story is told for the first time as tragedy. The account is fairly unembellished. Georges remembers:

how that de Reixach had so to speak forfeited his noble status during the famous night of August fourth, how he had later held a seat in the Convention, voted for the king's death, then, probably because of his military learning, been assigned to the armies to get himself beaten at last by the Spanish and then, disavowing himself a second time, had blown his brains out with a pistol. . . . (p. 58)

This is the story of Revolutionary enthusiasm, disillusionment and suicide as it comes to Georges via family legend. The above account, straightforward as it is, is contested by its context, which describes the sources and motives of the story. It is Sabine who preserves it, along with the de Reixach family house, papers and portrait collection; it is Sabine, herself a de Reixach, who believes the story in its tragic form. Georges maintains a certain distance, calling his mother's ramblings an "insipid and obsessive chatter" designed to augment the glory of her ancestry—"the line, the race, the caste, the dynasty of the de Reixachs" (p. 52). The hyperbolic crescendo of this series is a miniature model of the sequential retellings of her story. Especially important, then, is the fact that Georges knows the story serves sometimes to deprecate the nobility Sabine did not inherit, sometimes to augment the glory of her ancestry, but that it is always told as a *story* of some kind: "these scandalous, or ridiculous, or ignominious, or Cornelian stories" (p. 57). While he ridicules her perspective, however, Georges inherits Sabine's talent for verbal *bricolage*, so that in order to understand his story properly, we must read it in the way he reads Sabine's.

This is also how Blum proceeds, when he rewrites the story of the Ancestor as farce. Whereas Georges saw the Revolutionary de Reixach as an "Ancestor," it is Blum who calls him a "progenitor," then a "stallion." Incorporating elements from Georges's musings about Corinne and de Reixach, Blum spins a tale of a defeated general returning home to his only remaining illusion, his little wife, his little pigeon, whom he finds in bed with the coachman. In the process of Blum's retelling, wife and illusions merge in the figure of "one of those plaster Mariannes in a schoolroom or townhall" (p. 191), so that the Ancestor is cuckolded and made ridiculous not only by his wife, but also by his illusions and the Revolution itself, reincarnated as an unfaithful woman. The imagined sexual escapade satisfies their desire for stories, while the woman functions as a mask, an explanation of what remains puzzling, even as a scapegoat for the disasters of history.

If Sabine's stories are refracted through a Cornelian lens, Blum's intertexts are comedies. He siezes upon Corinne's extreme youth and de Reixach's age to reemplot the Ancestor's demise as a version of Molière's *School for Wives*, rebaptizing his characters accordingly as Agnès and Arnolphe. Of all the novel's characters, Blum is the most conscious of his own storytelling prowess, of the pleasure of reading and textual production. Unlike Georges, he is aware that he is telling stories just for the pleasure of invention, to pass the time in prison, and ultimately as an attempt to survive. When Georges protests that Blum is mixing up his "facts," Blum calmly replies, "That's right. But I think you can still imagine it" (p. 198), and proceeds to deliver his deliberately composite comedy. It might even be Blum's self-conscious storytelling that initiates Georges's impossible quest to know, and his confusion when in spite of his efforts, history always turns into stories plotted in recognizable genres. Georges is aware that Blum is the projected figure of his own doubts; he echoes Marx and Hegel (and Blum) when he reflects that the story of the Ancestor might very well be either high tragedy or a vaudeville act, since "vaudeville is always only an abortive tragedy and tragedy a farce without humor" (p. 201). Blum's understanding of the plots of history is the most sophisticated and self-aware of those proposed by the novel, and it probably corresponds closely to Simon's own.

In Blum's view, history is always told by someone. Furthermore, it is always told *for* someone. It is "confiscated, disinfected and finally edible, for the use of official school manuals and pedigreed

families . . .” (p. 190). Blum’s perspective is itself informed not only by his distance from the de Reixach family preoccupations (he knows their stories only through Georges), but also by his distance from their social class. He sees their stories and their worldview as a function of their class concerns. Like the others, Blum’s interpretations are elucidated by their context; shoveling coal in the prison camp, Blum describes his own poor Jewish ancestry, a family of tailors too concerned with making a living to paint their ancestors or consider suicide. From Blum’s point of view, “the suicide, the drama, the tragedy become a kind of elegant pastime” (p. 289). His is a tradition that has many stories but whose history is silent. His voice intrudes to contest the dominant notions of what constitutes history. Significantly, Georges makes no comments about Blum’s own story; on the other hand, Blum adopts and retells the tales and “pedigrees” of the aristocracy, retelling them in ways that surpass Georges’s capacity for self-irony. What the dying Blum leaves Georges to ponder after the war is the suspicion that his own stories have no function, that they do not even belong to him.

These retellings of the Ancestor’s story, as they mimic the loops of the narration, show that it is the teller who makes the story tragic or comic, and that an uncanny effect can derive from retelling as well as from actual recurrence of events. The accomplishment of *The Flanders Road* is to have created a verbal medium in which history becomes denaturalized and strange. That medium extends beyond the novel to include Camus, Sartre, Marc Bloch, Gordon Wright and others. It is this self-conscious highlighting of its own strangeness that constitutes the novel’s most effective historical dimension.

That language itself is inherently uncanny is demonstrated in the novel’s opening sentence. There, we are given a model of the kind of lively *chevauchement* of words that keeps the text moving. The sentence, an entire page in length, begins with de Reixach holding a letter from Sabine and ends with his statement addressed to Georges: “Your mother’s written me” (p. 7). Framed by the letter, the scene is set early one winter morning in 1940, after a sudden drop in temperature. While de Reixach chats with Georges, horses move by incessantly in the background, and Georges remembers that the night before the mud was so thick that horses and men sank ankle-deep. Near the end of the sentence he notices that the mud has frozen, leaving horseshoe imprints. Buried in the middle of these careful symmetries is Wack’s odd statement about the change in the

weather—"The dogs ate up the mud"—and Georges's reflection on Wack's remark:

I had never heard the expression, I could almost see the dogs, some kind of infernal, legendary creatures their mouths pink-rimmed their wolf fangs cold and white chewing up the black mud in the night's gloom, perhaps a recollection, the devouring dogs cleaning, clearing away. . . . (p. 8)

These monstrous dogs announce the novel's transformations and hybrids, and the phrase "I could almost see" becomes Georges's refrain to describe the vividness of his mental images. But why "perhaps a recollection?" The first "recollection" of the novel is an important clue to all the rest. How often do we hear an expression or a word that we have never really *heard*, and suddenly find it strange? It is familiar and yet unfamiliar, because it is known but at the same time, in a sense, repressed.

Here on its first page, *The Flanders Road* points out that language itself is uncanny and capable of giving birth to monsters when it reappears in the full force of its literal dimension. Not by accident is this parable of language's return surrounded by the arrival of the letter. Not surprising either is the presence in this first sentence of horses, prefiguring the obsessive dead horse, for a *cheval de bataille* (battle horse), even a dead one, is literally no more than an obsession, a "favorite subject, to which one returns" (*Petit Robert Dictionary*). The problem is that when a dead horse is seen as an obsession by definition, the historical horse disappears, as the return of language into a text about history erases the past. Is the dead horse a signified or a signifier, for example, and is Corinne a figment of Georges's (the narration's) imagination, produced in part by memories of an ancestor "cuckolded by his ideals?" Corinne puts a stop to the wild proliferation of the linguistic imagination by refusing to be the object of a fantasy, the product of someone else's text. But she leaves the novel at that point, and leaves Georges oscillating between the poles of his dilemma, and the narration between language and history. Finally, he is reduced to asking not only "but how can you tell?" but also "what is there to tell?"²⁵

When language returns to history, the historical signified fades, and when history returns, language fades. This is as true of the critic's discourse as it is of the novel. The linguistic sign is a sphinx, a hybrid

of sound and sense, and the historical novel a contradiction in terms. History and language are each other's repressed; the abrupt return of either disrupts our confidence in both. Neither history nor language is uncanny in itself, but together, each represses and threatens to chase the other away, like the oscillation of a figure-ground optical illusion. When we think we have grasped the novel's language (or its history), its history (or its language) returns to dismantle our understanding. Most critics of the novel have dealt, implicitly or explicitly, with one dimension or the other. Readers of Simon's historical fictions can fall into one of two traps: language without history, or history without language. What I have tried to do is fall into each pitfall in turn, hoping to emerge with a description of the trap.

Georges knows that books imitate events. He also suspects that events imitate books ("You read too much" [p. 130], says Blum, when Georges declares he would not mind dying of love.) Shoved into a cattle car headed for a concentration camp, he wonders if he has been turned into an animal, if he and his companions are "men changed with a tap of a wand into pigs or trees or stones all by reciting some Latin verses . . ." (p. 101). Life is mediated by books, as Emma Bovary never found out, and not only by Ovid, but also by all the plots of novels and other cultural texts we use to tell ourselves reality. Usually we are unaware of this process. By showing the power and processes by which texts can produce and erase events, Simon shows the deadly importance of the (hi)stories a culture tells.

Beyond conclusions (an epilogue)

Echoing some of the plot configurations and generic forms I have outlined, Frank Kermode proposes that the minimal model of plot can be found in "tick-tock," with life (or the novel) as the structured interval between. Having survived "tick," he says, we live in the expectation of "tock."²⁶ This is not the case in *The Flanders Road*: at its last page, the novel just continues ticking. Novels constructed on spatio-graphic principles, or plots that follow the turning and returning of words, suggest that when death arrives, it should arrive in the middle, and not constitute a conclusion or a resolution of puzzles and questions. Since Flaubert at least, novelists have looked for alternatives to the well-wrought ending. Simon's (and other New Novelists') inconclusive endings and the spatial configurations that structure their plots can be seen as directly challenging views of the novel or of history that consider a tale flawed if it fails to conclude.

Camus's Sisyphus too suspected that full consciousness of absurdity would mean renouncing "the wild longing for clarity" and instead assuming the task of beginning over (*Sisyphus*, p. 16). It is worth wondering whether postwar novelists' awareness of their stories' literal dimension (elaborate plot "lines," exaggeration of generic conventions) might not be related to theories of history that envision a Final Solution. Such theories have been conceived by those who have or take the power to impose their own referential plots. Apocalyptic ideologies that postulate the advent of a utopian Empire justify all sorts of ironing out of tangled paths. It is surely no accident that at the end of *The Flanders Road*, the wandering soldiers turn into horsemen of an uncanny anti-apocalypse bringing no final resolution or resplendent transcendent Signified or Holy Kingdom, but simply wandering lost and afraid in a forest of images, returning back over the same ground.

NOTES

1. Claude Simon, *The Flanders Road*, tr. Richard Howard (New York: Georges Braziller, 1961). Originally *La Route des Flandres* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1960). Page references in the essay are to the English edition.
2. The expression is from Robert Jay Lifton, *Death in Life: Survivors of Hiroshima* (New York: Random House, 1967), p. 49.
3. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Cinq Notes sur Claude Simon," *Médiations*, No. 4 (1961), p. 6.
4. Michel Butor calls novels a form of research, adding that the modern world requires new tools that will upset old habits of perception and create new forms of consciousness. "Le Roman comme recherche," in *Répertoire* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1960), pp. 7-11.
5. *La Corde raide* (Paris: Sagittaire, 1947), p. 178.
6. For a broad discussion of theories of history and the historical novel as they can be related to Simon's fiction, see David Carroll, *The Subject in Question: The Languages of Theory and the Strategies of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 88-160.
7. *Orion Aveugle* (Geneva: Skira, 1970), Preface, n. pag., my translation.
8. Simon, "La Fiction mot à mot," in *Nouveau Roman: hier, aujourd'hui* (Paris: 10/18, 1972), pp. 88-89, my translation.

9. Care must be taken when using words like *prefigure* and *repeat*, since sometimes what precedes at the level of the narration (in the text) follows at the level of the fiction (the story), or vice versa.
10. Otto Rank, *The Double: A Psychoanalytic Study*, tr. and intro. by Harry Tucker, Jr. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1971), p. xx.
11. Peter Brooks, "Freud's Masterplot," *Yale French Studies* 55/56 (1977), 295. Brooks is referring to Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, tr. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1961).
12. Freud, "The Uncanny," *Collected Papers*, IV, 368-407. Passages cited are from pp. 389-90 and p. 390.
13. See Lucien Dällenbach, "Mise en abyme et redoublement spéculaire chez Claude Simon," *Claude Simon: Colloque de Cerisy* (Paris: 10/18, 1975), pp. 158-61 for more implications of the word and practice of *chevauchement* in Simon's fiction.
14. "Because a letter always arrives at its destination," Jacques Lacan, "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter,'" tr. Jeffrey Mehlman, *Yale French Studies* 48 (1972), 72.
15. Alistair Horne, *To Lose a Battle: France 1940* (New York: Penguin, 1969), p. 258.
16. Marc Bloch, *Strange Defeat: A Statement of Evidence Written in 1940*, tr. Gerard Hopkins (London: Oxford, 1949). The categories of defeat mentioned in this paragraph are sections of Bloch's discussion.
17. Tr. Justin O'Brien (New York: Random House, 1955), p. 22.
18. See Geoffrey Bruun, *The Rise of the French Imperium* (New York: Harper & Row, 1959).
19. Simon, *Le Palace* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1962), my translation.
20. *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972).
21. "Les Secrets d'un romancier," interview with Hubert Juin, *Les Lettres Françaises*, 6 Oct., 1960, p. 5.
22. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Situations V: Colonialisme et néo-colonialisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), pp. 59, 73-74, 103.
23. Gordon Wright, *France in Modern Times* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1974), p. 423.
24. Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: International, 1954), p. 5.
25. In the French original, "mais comment savoir, que savoir?" (p. 306). The English edition glosses over this important shift by translating Georges's question identically to its previous appearances, "but how can you tell, how can you tell?" (p. 312).
26. Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (New York: Oxford, 1967), pp. 45-46 et passim.